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Howard Rheingold, Editor
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U.S.A.

Dear Howard:

Thanks for the postcard in response to my letter taking you to task about your debut line. WER has done a lot more than to publish an excellent issue on Islam, it has parodied that issue by adding graffiti to the illustrations and repeating them in the next one. It has also reviewed Noam Chomsky and spread lots of other seditious stuff in every issue, but when Ken Kesey decided to blame his son's death on the cost of shelling the mideast, no one seemed to notice that his son couldn't have afforded the gas to get into peril without that kind of diplomacy. This seems uneven.

Perhaps you and your staff would like to be pioneers in seeing the U.S. as others see it. I am too busy just now putting an alternative vehicle into production to write you a special feature, but I am sending a copy of letters I wrote to the International Human Powered Vehicle Association last fall. I am sure there is more and better researched commentary in your own library, but if you prefer your stuff raw, here it is:

With very best wishes,

Robert Stuart

Bob Stuart

P.S. The three renewal notices enclosed were sent the day after your postcard in response to my letter, which included a renewal.

August 10, 1990

Dear Marti:

Here is a "further to" the mini Board Meeting I attended. I would like it to be circulated to the whole board and any other interested parties, but I would much prefer to remain anonamous. In order to be useful, I will have to be frank, and I think that the recipients will be hard put not to react as if I had insulted their mothers. I don't want to get into long discussions with those whose self-respect will depend on changing my opinion, I just want to present information that is in short supply in our organization.

I recently visited the U.S.A., under some coercion, and was a bit surprised at finding the people at least as charming and generous as ever. I was only tempted to launch a private political attack once, when a stranger had been boring me for a half hour, and he quickly backed off. I was surprised because it had been a while since I had been there, and my recent experience of U.S. citizens had been as groups abroad rather than as individuals at home.

One of the worst things about being relatively rich is that it is really hard to get straight information about anything. Everyone wants to be pleasing, because their own success is usually affected by their relationship with more powerful people. The usual pattern is for a person or group with a positive self-image and no strong feeling of universal brotherhood to acquire a bit of some surplus. Other people who want some of that stuff gather around, and those few who do the best job of flattery or trading are allowed to benefit both themselves and the first patron. Those who are left out become a sub-class, seen as naturally and deservedly poor. This then goes into a positive feedback loop, and society delaminates into many economic classes, with increasing concentration of wealth. To maintain one's station, each member must feel comfortable with those in the immediate vicinity on the economic ladder, but there is a lot of resentment directed a few rungs up and mistrust a few levels down. This continues until the powerful group isolates itself from uncomfortable news to the extent that it gets blindsided by a change that can wipe it out.

As an International group, the IHPVA should be able to deal with most people on earth. As a promoter of Human Power, it should be able to attract those with average incomes in the majority of poor countries. As a U.S.A. founded organization, it is badly, but not impossibly handicapped in doing this.

Most U.S.Americans think of their country as a champion of democracy and freedom. Most people who do not depend on U.S.A.transactions for their daily bread think this is a sour joke. The U.S.A. has interferred with the democratic process everywhere from Australia ('75) to Zaire ('64). The C.I.A. has no hesitancy about supporting horribly bloodthirsty armies anywhere until the population is ready to vote the way the U.S.A. companies want them to.

As strange as it may seem, people in other countries think that they should vote in a way that benefits themselves and their countries first, and the U.S.A. only if cooperation is mutually beneficial. As it is, everyone must ask themselves wether they will be punished by one of the many means available to the U.S.A. if they try to assert themselves when they vote in their own elections. It is as if the U.S.A. has licenced the use of the democratic process to other countries, but still retains a veto.

When the U.S.A. makes a business deal in a developing courtry, it is dealing from a position of strength, having more money, guns, options and time. The deal, predictably, generally goes badly for the poorer partner. The profits, which could have enriched the sellers, wind up in the hands of a few well-protected people, who are still arming themselves further. In many countries, complaining about this can get you killed or worse. Thus, a lot of unspoken resentment is building up.

I can't expect the our organization to change all this, but I think it behooves the board to become informed and sensitive to these issues if it expects to deserve the name IHPVA.

After 15 years of "International Championships" in North America, we seem to be responding to our bellwether hotheads and starting to include other developed nations, particularly the old country, in our calculations. To develop ties to the third world will be even more difficult, for us and them, but the attempt should surely be made, since at present, their planners are hoping to put car in as many garages as possible there and repeat the western disaster many times worse.

To build cooperation with other nations, U.S.Americans have several strengths to draw upon. Few doubt that the U.S.A. is serious about freedom for those within her borders. A lot of the information about her real foreign policy is published within the U.S.A. and sent abroad. Just the fact that Noam Chomsky is still breathing reassures intellectuals everywhere. This, plus the easy charm of U.S.American manners makes it easy for others to assume that the individual they are dealing with is among those who would have sent Bush to jail for high treason rather than electing him President. If this opening is supported by some evidence that one has taken the trouble to learn and accept some facts about the other country, and does not have a strong refexive defence of the U.S.A., open communication and dealing can ensue. One can also start with the small number of foreign nationals who do benefit from U.S.A. policy and are not irritated by it, but are still able to deal well with their fellow countrymen. As long as special priviliges are not asked for the U.S.A., there will not be many counter demands for special responsibilities or boycotts.

In order for us to stay relevant in Europe and the developed world, we should adopt a policy of allocating the World Championships according to how many innovative H.P.V.s a region has. If North America has half the vehicles, Europe 40%, and Australia 10%, for instance, the Title of IHPSC should go to N.A. every other year, Australia once per decade, and to Europe the other 4 years. As long as we have enough members in these areas to mount a credible event, the number of IHPVA members should soon match the number of vehicles. We may have to give some areas a boost to get them started, or risk staying less than fully International.

The situation in the developing world is more challenging. It is unlikely that they will have many entries for the 200 meter sprints, or even enough entries with travel expenses for an event like those in North America. According to Fred Wilkie, they have not even had the capital and basic information to experiment with bikes and trikes that fit their average stature instead of being sized for Europeans. We should try to learn from the experience of many well-meaning development agencies and workers who have wasted their efforts on improvements that were not well integrated with the existing conditions.

The severe economic limitations on H.P.V.s there may have as many important lessons for us as our technical expertise has for them. The results of the _____ prize will be of great interest in poorer countries, and they may often win it too. Contests involving marathon rides from home to event could be very relevant and popular there. In hot climates, bodywork is less important, and its utility is further reduced by the need to carry more. It would be interesting to know if bicycle trailers are intrinsically unsuitable or just under promoted until now.

My country was born to the sound of contra-style raids financed in the U.S.A., and it has been shaken to its foundations recently by people working to legally ruin us to the benefit of the U.S.A.

Feb. 22/90

Dear Jean;

I say bravo for Mike Burrows taking the IHPVA to task for not being much more International than the "World Series". Mike is mostly expressing the new European feeling that they are now, collectively, more important than the "Great Powers". I, as a Canadian and World citizen am feeling that the relationship between the U.S. contingent and the rest of the world is so potentially embarassing to me that I am planning to let my own personal membership lapse if things do not improve over the next year. In general, I think that U.S. citizens are well-meaning, but very out of practice at dealing fairly and realistically with other countries. For instance, I notice that if the query letters I get include a stamp, there is a 90% chance that it is a U.S. stamp, which is useless here.

If the IHPVA board is serious about promoting memberships internationally, I think that an excellent way of getting the necessary input and balance would be to form a senate consisting of one or two members each from as many countries as possible, and give it, effectively, veto power. If something reasonably drastic is not done, we will be severely limiting our potential and relevance worldwide.

The policy of the International group is for everyone to pay their membership, regardless of time donated, but to charge more to non-U.S. members on the partial justification that U.S. members do more of the organizing work. (The main justification, that U.S. domestic postage is subsidized by the Govt., is a major irritation, since it is an article of faith that everyone out here subsidizes the U.S.)